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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: AFGHAN OPPOSITION LEADERS WELCOME US POLICY
STATEMENT ON ELECTIONS, BUT CONCERNED ABOUT US NEUTRALITY

Classified By: CDA Francis Ricciardone for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) On April 6, potential presidential election candidates opposed to President Karzai strongly welcomed, but were openly skeptical of, SRAP Richard Holbrooke's clear statement of US neutrality in the upcoming election. Accompanied by JCS Chairman Adm. Mullen, Holbrooke emphasized that the US neither supports nor opposes any candidate, including Karzai, and that we support free and fair elections and a level playing field. He also stressed the importance of continuity of government under Karzai between May 22 and the inauguration of the next president.

2. United Front leaders said the opposition coalition was nearing an endorsement of former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah. In a separate meeting, former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani assessed his odds as the best among the field to defeat President Karzai. Each Afghan opposition leader told SRAP he was ready to move beyond ethnic calculations in electoral politics, but that Pashtuns, who constitute a plurality of the country's population, would still control the fate of the election. End Summary.

Abdullah: I'm Top Candidate on Foreign Policy

3. (C) Former FM Abdullah said he was close to securing the United Front opposition coalition's endorsement for his candidacy and would formally launch his campaign soon after that. He was also reaching out to former Uzbek warlord Gen. Dostum and influential Hazara leader Mohaqqueq for their support to consolidate votes in the northern and central regions. He believed he could strike a "gentlemen's agreement" with former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani to strengthen his support in a theoretical second round of voting, but that an alliance beforehand was unlikely.

4. (C) Abdullah believed he was the best candidate on foreign policy, presented a stable image of leadership to foreign governments, and had excellent relations with Pakistan, India, and Western countries. SRAP agreed positive relations with India and Pakistan would be important for the next Afghan president, and that more must be done to get Pakistan's government and intelligence service to understand Afghanistan's security improved their own country's security. Abdullah added that China could play an important role in improving Pakistan's role in Afghanistan.

5. (C) Abdullah said 1st Vice President Massoud had recently withdrawn his request for the UF's endorsement, clearing the field for Abdullah's campaign. He was confident he would carry the votes of nearly all UF supporters, even though Karzai and MP Abdul Rassoul Sayyaf had coordinated with UF member Marshall Fahim Khan to divide the opposition. Even if Fahim became one of the vice presidents on the president's ticket, Abdullah thought that Fahim's record of corruption and previous poor government performance would limit

defections by UF voters to Karzai.

Qanooni: Abdullah Endorsement Likely

¶6. (C) Speaker Qanooni told SRAP the United Front's inner circle would meet later that day to discuss its presidential nominee. Abdullah would likely win the coalition's support. SRAP questioned whether Abdullah could attract enough Pashtun votes to win, but Qanooni stressed the need to look beyond ethnic-based politics and welcome new faces and a new generation into Afghan politics. SRAP agreed, saying many Americans never believed an African American could be elected to lead the country until President Obama won last November.

Ghani: I'm Best Qualified to Lead

¶7. (C) Former Finance Minister Ghani confirmed to SRAP that he was a presidential candidate and believed he would be the strongest challenger to Karzai. He thought Abdullah was within reach of the United Front's endorsement, but that he could not win the election "in 100 years." Abdullah would not be able to win the Pashtun vote, despite his half-Pashtun heritage, and his candidacy could only fracture the opposition. Uzbek warlord Dostum and Mohaqqueq remained influential powerbrokers, even though they would not run, he said.

¶8. (U) This message has been cleared with SRAP's office.

RICCIARDONE